

Minimum Wage, Biz Tax Loopholes Top Fla. Dems' Agenda

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Law360, Miami (February 20, 2014, 8:22 PM ET) -- Florida House Democratic Leader Perry E. Thurston Jr. called for an increased minimum wage, a rollback of vehicle fees and the closure of a corporate tax loophole among other goals, as part of the minority party's policy plan for the 2014 legislative session unveiled Thursday.

The Democrats issued a 15-page report urging policies that benefit the middle class through initiatives for Florida's economy, health care and education, and through environmental projects and upgrades to transportation infrastructure.

"Fairness in Florida is too often elusive when it comes to our tax structure, our judicial system, and for many people, at the workplace. Sadder yet, under Governor Rick Scott and Republican legislative leaders' custody, children and other vulnerable residents have been neglected, and some have lost their lives," Thurston said in a letter introducing the report.

At a Thursday press conference, Thurston, D-Fort Lauderdale; Rep. Mark Pafford, D-West Palm Beach, the Democratic policy chair and Thurston's designated successor; and Democratic Leader Pro Tempore Mia Jones, D-Jacksonville, led off with discussion of initiatives to improve the state's economy, which they described as mired in mediocrity with too many jobs falling into the low-paying service industry.

Echoing President Barack Obama's proposal from the State of the Union, Thurston called for the state's minimum wage to be increased from \$7.93 to \$10.10 an hour.

"We don't think that an individual should work in Florida full time, 40 hours, and still be below the poverty line," Thurston said. "We think that it will benefit all Floridians, and it will make our economy much better."

A loophole in the tax code that allows corporations to avoid paying Florida taxes on products sold in the state by claiming that the businesses are headquartered out of state should be closed, they said, because it puts actual Florida-based businesses at a disadvantage to multistate competitors.

The Democrats also called for a comprehensive review of Florida's more than 200 existing sales tax exemptions, to see which ones are actually fulfilling their economic incentive goals.

Thurston said the Democrats also support a rollback of 2009 fee hikes on various vehicle administrative fees, which has been supported by Gov. Rick Scott in his budget and proposed in legislation currently making its way through committee.

Scott issued a statement welcoming Democratic support for the idea, saying, "This is a great first step in returning money to hard-working Floridians. We are committed to return \$500 million to Florida families this year as part of our 'It's Your Money Tax Cut Budget,' which includes undoing the 54 percent tax increase families saw in 2009 to register their motor vehicles. This has never been government's money, and we are happy to have the support of our colleagues in the Legislature."

However, on Thursday, Thurston criticized the Republican majority for not acting sooner on the issue.

"We unanimously opposed those back in 2009. We continued to oppose them, and therefore we will be in support of repealing those fee hikes," he said. "Quite frankly, we wish it had been done a long time ago, [rather] than just being done during an election season."

On the issue of health care, a major dividing point across the aisle, the Democrats are pushing for Florida to draw down the full \$51 billion in federal funds available under the Affordable Care Act to provide increased coverage for all Floridians, with Thurston noting that such efforts will also result in more jobs for state residents.

"If we don't address that this session, it's our position that we've wasted a session," he said, promising to force discussion of the issue.

Thurston added that the state's budget surplus this year should also be used for increases in education spending and efforts to take care of the state's most vulnerable residents. The policy report also calls for initiatives to protect the state's water supply, a statewide plan to address rising sea levels, and investments in transportation infrastructure, among others.

--Editing by Edrienne Su.